Volunteering for library work

The pluses and minuses can add up to less than you think, says *Jenn Evans*

More people are looking for work than there are jobs. Many people, for very good reasons, are giving their time and skills as volunteers. What are their motives? What are the outcomes?

Who volunteers?

1. Newly-qualified librarians who experience increasing difficulty in finding their first professional position, if they have never worked in library work, because:
- large libraries no longer provide 'training positions';
- with decreasing budgets and lower staff numbers, management may not consider their staff have the time, or obligation, to train staff who aren't initially very productive;
- the total numbers of jobs have decreased, leading to more competition—an 'employers' market';
- there is an excess of librarians for the positions that exist.

It is very understandable that, in order to get off the roundabout of 'no experience, no job', these newcomers to the profession seek to gain some experience through volunteering.

2. Depending on the requirements of the particular training course (for example in Victoria library technicians in training must be in paid employment before commencing certain units of the course, and complete a minimum period before qualifying) trainee library technicians may seek to get some library experience by volunteering in order to improve their chances of gaining a paid position and finishing their course.

3. In a profession in which there are more females than males, many take time out for parenting, so librarians and library technicians returning to the workforce feel the need to bring their skills up-to-date before they are confident enough to compete for paid work. There are no refresher courses available for this purpose.

4. Some, while on parental leave, and retirees, volunteer their services, especially to school libraries.

Who benefits?

The libraries get:
- free labour which in turn may…
- free other staff from repetitive and/or clerical tasks…
- allowing for possible improvement of services.

The librarians and library technicians get some new or updating experience, potentially leading to:
- an increase in marketable skills;
- a recent reference;
- a widening network;
- new or re-established confidence;
- social interaction;
- some measure of control over their future and maybe, in time, contacts that will lead to *a paid job*.

All of that sounds very positive, so are there any problems? Unfortunately, the answer is 'yes', there may be—and possibly will be in the future. For example, volunteering may lead to:
- exploitation—using skilled volunteers for menial tasks and not helping volunteers to learn new skills;
- a devaluing of the skills of library and information workers in the market place—a worker who is not paid is seldom valued by organisations, however grateful the librarian who is being helped may be;
- fewer future jobs, as instead of searching for ways to find the funds to fill necessary positions, the organisation uses volunteers;
- some potential to learn old fashioned or unprofessional practices.

Some suggestions for intending volunteers

1. Read ALIA's *Statement on Volunteer Workers in Libraries and Guidelines for Volunteer Workers in Libraries* in the ALIA Handbook 1991-92, p.123-124.
2. Assess any voluntary work you may do by these guidelines. Especially, don't do work which would normally be done by paid library staff— e.g., establish or maintain new library services; undertake normal clerical, paraprofessional or professional duties; replace a member of the paid library staff.
3. Limit the length of time you commit to any particular organisation.
4. Indicate that, in return for your free services, you would like to be taught some new procedures, and have a reference or a referee who would talk to potential employers about you.
5. If possible, offer your services to community based or non-profit organisations. ■